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Old Boys At the CIA

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Aldrich Hazen Ames, the spy with three last names, might not have run his scam as long as he did had he been plain Fred Jones or Billy Bob Smith. Then his fellow spooks might have been more suspicious when he drove up to work one day in a new Jaguar, fresh from his mortgage-free $540,000 manse.

Let me rephrase that as a question: Does the still-unfolding Ames case reveal the Central Intelligence Agency as a mini-class system that has begun a decline into obsolescence and decay?

It is grandiose overstatement to refer to an intelligence agency as a class system, of course. What we are really talking about is an old boys' network—a network that also revolves around the central notions of a class system: inherited privilege and social solidarity.

Those notions permeate the case of Ames, the 52-year-old former head of counterintelligence for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the CIA, now accused of having spied for the Kremlin. He was hired by the agency before even finishing college because of his father's good record there. He was, the old boys at the agency decided, OUF: One Of Us.

A sense of social solidarity may help explain why the U.S. intelligence community, which spends about $30 billion a year to discover the world's most guarded secrets, failed to see a significant and suspicious change of behavior that occurred under its nose. There are some things OUFs are not expected to do.

CIA Director R. James Woolsey reportedly said as much when he informed CIA employees of Ames's arrest. A Washington Post account paraphrased Woolsey saying on closed circuit television that he found such a betrayal hard to comprehend "involving as it did both harm to the country and a violation of a spy's personal and professional obligations."

That is the mind-set that produced the failure of the agency to follow Ronald Reagan's most famous dictum: Trust but Verify. The spymasters trusted Ames but did not verify his bank accounts. Indeed, the agency does not seem to have even asked to see them. (Reagan was president when Ames's alleged treachery began.)

Ex-director Robert M. Gates bristled on television when journalists suggested that failing to check Ames's finances may possibly have been an error. Congress did not order us to check employees' bank accounts, Gates said by way of explanation. The agency was uncomfortable about being too "intrusive" in the lives of its employees, he added.

I doubt that delicacy about intrusiveness really explains the agency's failure in the Ames case. I think the spymasters missed a crucial turn in their business, much as Philco stuck with radios at the dawn of the television era and IBM let its disdain for laptop computers undermine its corporate foundations.

The agency seems to have stuck with the idea that what OUFs don't do is spy for big money. Internal controls are designed to weed out or capture ideological turncoats or agents caught in the familiar KGB honeypot trap of compromising sexual situations that expose fallen agents to blackmail.

The CIA was run in a tweedy Ivy League fashion in its first decades and has remained deeply influenced by the Anglophilia of its founders. Ideology and/or sex were at the core of Britain's big spy cases. The CIA's first line of counterespionage defense assumed, perhaps unconsciously, that the same would be true for American spies.

But times change. In the 1980s the Walker family, Ronald Pelton and other cash-short Americans got big bonuses for signing up with the KGB and selling their country secret by secret. In a world of satellite photography and the big ears of electronic surveillance, spies concentrated more and more on the commerce of turning each other's coats.

Seventy to eighty percent of a CIA covert agent's working hours is spent on one activity: trying to recruit his or her opposite number in the Kremlin's secret service. That estimate comes from several CIA field agents, all speaking with the same tones of frustration over this misplaced expenditure of time and effort.

This is marketplace activity, the buying and selling of careers and lives. In its last decade the KGB dominated this loathsome traffic. In contrast, the major Soviet defectors in that period came over not for money but because they saw the failure and inevitable doom of a bankrupt Soviet system.

The Ames case displays a third characteristic of the class system, even one as small as an old boys' network. A self-contained aristocracy is eventually corrupted or overwhelmed by money.

Treating espionage primarily as a marketplace activity exposed the OUFs of the CIA to the virus of betrayal through greed. If he is guilty as charged, Aldrich Hazen Ames became One Of Them, and a traitor to his professional class, for money.